Staying Open

The State of Adirondack Grocery Stores and Opportunities for Action

AdkAction

We make life better across the Adirondacks through partnerships and creative problem solving.

www.adkaction.org



Executive Summary

In the small communities of the Adirondack Park, grocery stores serve as more than a place to buy food. They are employers, anchors of the local economy, and places to stay connected with neighbors and community happenings. When a rural grocery store closes, a community loses more than shopping convenience.

Through interviews with grocers and customers, AdkAction documented the state of independent grocery stores across the Adirondacks in this report. We identified challenges to the survival of these stores, as well as strengths and adaptations already at work.

From 2025 to 2026, AdkAction tested whether small, targeted investments could overcome the grocers' barriers directly. With funding from Adirondack Community Foundation we awarded micro grants to five independent grocers in Clinton, Essex, Hamilton, and St. Lawrence counties, letting each grocer identify their own biggest operational barrier.

This report shows that a small amount of well-placed support can produce real results. A larger, sustained investment, from economic development agencies, government partners, and philanthropic organizations, could do even more.



Why grocery stores matter

Grocery stores in the Adirondacks are often more than just a place to buy food; they connect people, provide a local meeting place, and serve as lifelines in small towns. Many of our Adirondack communities are rural and isolated, making simple tasks like grocery shopping more difficult. The small, independent grocery store provides both essential connection and nutrition to rural communities preventing food deserts from emerging, while also supporting the local economy by keeping dollars and cents inside a community. The survival of these grocery stores reflects the resilience and resourcefulness we often see within Adirondack communities.

Food access advocacy is often centered around the consumer and producer, rather than the retailer. This framing treats grocery stores merely as neutral delivery points, as if the food will appear once demand exists. The store itself is rarely centered as an entity that also needs support, protection, and advocacy. Grocery stores are fragile systems, especially independent grocers operating with thin profit margins, seasonal customer swings, and staffing challenges. These stores are critical infrastructure, serving as economic anchors and bellwethers for a strong community. This mindset allows us to reframe the frequently asked question "How do we provide food to people?" to "How do we keep the places that already provide food?" By recognizing local grocers as a core component of food access, we can protect the assets we already have to provide more stable food security.

Reframing the question: "How do we provide food to people?" to

"How do we *keep* the places that already provide food?"



The food security ladder

Food security exists along a continuum, not a binary of secure or insecure. A tiered framework helps identify gaps: access to food, access to fresh and nutritious food, and access to local food. Progress at higher tiers depends on stability at lower ones: access to local food cannot substitute for reliable grocery access, and fresh food is difficult to sustain without affordability and choice. Grocery stores are intertwined throughout every tier, making them central to any strategy for food security.

The foundational tier is **access to enough food to meet basic dietary needs**, in both quantity and autonomy of choice. In rural Adirondack communities, barriers include low incomes, travel distances, limited reliable transportation, and inconsistent access to nutrition assistance programs. Interventions here focus on income supports, benefit enrollment, transportation, and keeping year-round grocery stores open.

The second tier addresses diet quality: **consistent access to fresh produce, whole grains, lean proteins, and minimally processed foods.** Many food-secure households still lack affordable access to fresh food, especially in rural areas, where prices run higher and availability is inconsistent. Strategies here include increasing prevalence of produce incentives like Double Up Food Bucks and improved fresh food distribution support for rural grocers.

The third tier is **access to locally produced food**, which adds benefits of freshness, community resilience, and local economic development. Access is uneven: towns deep within the Park or that have lost their agricultural base may have little to no local food without aggregation, distribution, and retail partnerships.



What we mean by ‘Grocery Store’

For this project, we used a broad, function-based definition of “grocery store” to reflect how food access actually works in rural Adirondack communities. Traditional definitions based on store size or inventory don’t capture reality in markets this dispersed and seasonal.

We define a rural grocery store as:

> **a small, independent food business exchanging money for food and household staples, located far from a full-service supermarket.**

This includes small grocers, general stores, and gas stations with food retail and delis. We excluded chains, dollar stores, and gas stations like Stewarts’ Shoppes from outreach to focus specifically on independent providers.

What defines these stores isn’t size or inventory, but function: consistent food access, adaption to local demand, and community space. Many operate hybrid models, pairing groceries with prepared foods, hardware, or household goods to stay viable.

Just as important, they often serve as third spaces, informal gathering points beyond home and work where residents connect, especially in towns with few other public gathering spots.



State of Rural Grocers in the Adirondacks

There are roughly 30 independent grocery stores operating within the Adirondack Park, not including convenience stores, chains, or gas stations. Most are family owned and operated, some across multiple generations, including Valley Grocery, Otto's Abode, and Charlie John's, all in operation since the mid-1900's. Others, like Keeseville Grocery and K&D Deli have opened in the last few years, showing this is a living, evolving sector rather than one solely in decline.

Larger chains common elsewhere in the Northeast are scarce within the Park itself. Hannaford and Market 32 have only one location, in Lake Placid, though both operate stores in nearby towns like Plattsburgh, Malone, and Potsdam. Tops Friendly Market, by contrast, has become a staple in smaller communities like Au Sable Forks, Elizabethtown, and North Creek. Dollar stores have also become customary in our rural Adirondack towns, offering affordable groceries closer to home, but as national corporations they don't reinvest in local suppliers, jobs, or community initiatives the way independent grocers do.

Comprehensive data specifically focused on rural, independent grocers within the Adirondack Park is limited. Most available information comes from scattered local reporting rather than systematic counts or centralized databases. More data exists on food security broadly, which offers insight into the consumer experience, but understanding the status of the stores themselves is essential to seeing the full picture, since grocers are part of the solution, not just a backdrop to it.

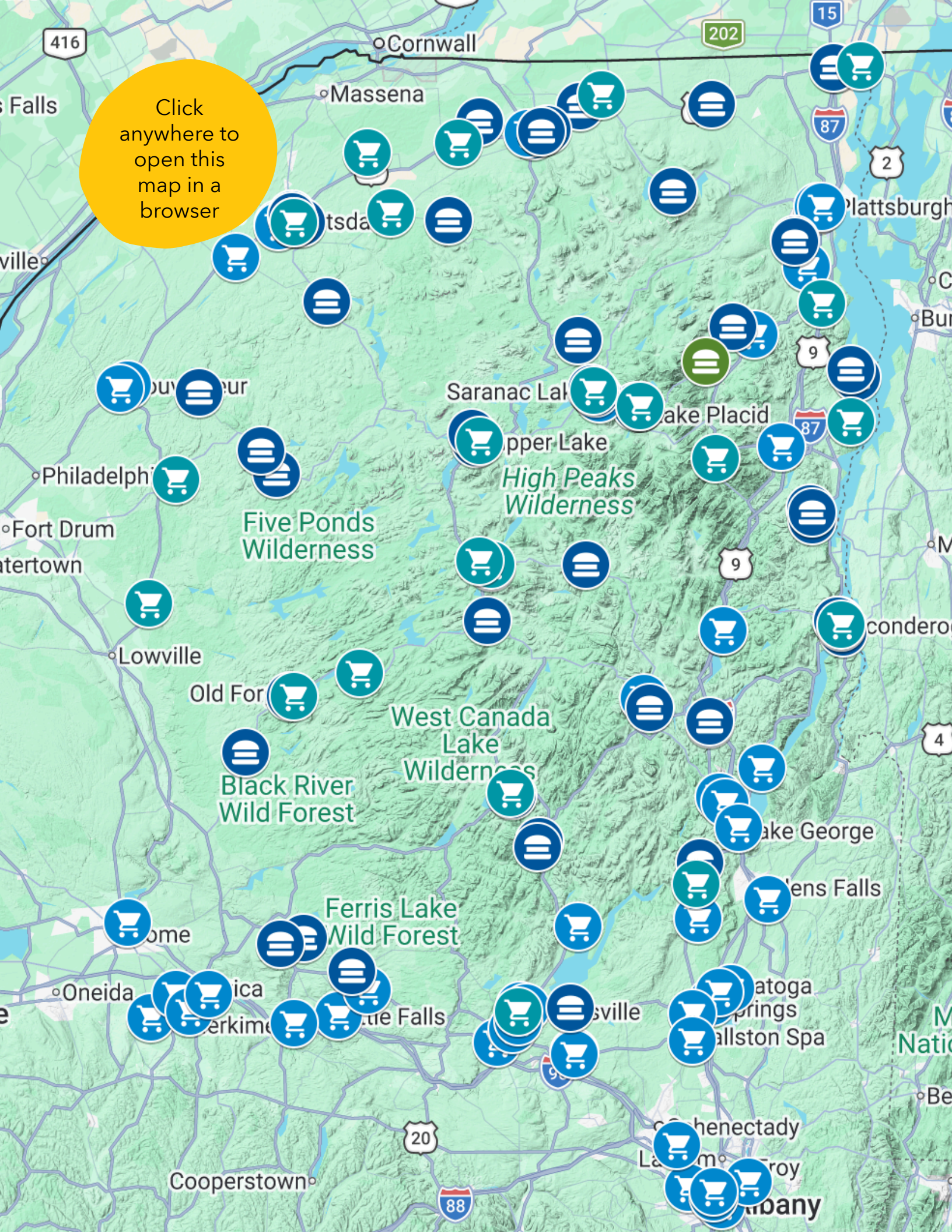
The best source of data for this work came directly from the grocers, customers, and their real life experiences. While some themes were shared across stores, the variation between different communities and business models across the Adirondack Park means each grocery store has its own story. We're grateful to the grocers who took the time to speak with us and help us understand the threats they face and the strengths they bring.

Adirondack communities are served by

30+ independent grocers

Some open since the mid-1900's

Others opened in just the last few years


Click anywhere to open this map in a browser
Cornwall
Massena
Saranac Lake
Lake Placid
Upper Lake
High Peaks Wilderness
Five Ponds Wilderness
Philadelphia
Fort Drum
Watertown
Lowville
Old Forge
West Canada Lake Wilderness
Black River Wild Forest
Ferris Lake Wild Forest
Oneida
Little Falls
Lake George
Glens Falls
Saratoga Springs
Ballston Spa
Schenectady
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Albany
Cooperstown
Plattsburgh
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Staying Open: Threats and Barriers

Rural grocery stores in the Adirondacks operate within a unique and challenging environment shaped by factors such as geography and seasonal population shifts. These barriers have direct implications for food access, local economic stability, and the overall resilience of Adirondack communities. There is risk running a grocery store, much like any business. The best mitigation to that risk comes from keen awareness of it, both for business owners and economic development leaders. Conversations with grocery store owners helped clarify the barriers they currently face and the vulnerabilities they are working to address.

Customer Behavior and Beliefs

A major barrier facing Adirondack grocers is a shift in habits and culture driven by the loss of local businesses. Historically, many towns supported a small ecosystem of services such as hardware stores, pharmacies, auto shops, and grocers; that encouraged residents to shop locally. As these services disappear one by one, residents are forced to travel to regional centers like Plattsburgh, Glens Falls, or Potsdam to meet multiple needs in a single trip, often completing their grocery shopping at a big box retailer along the way, even if a local store remains closer to home.

"Some customers are very supportive because they understand what it takes to keep a store like this here," one grocer shared. **"Others shop out-of-town for lower prices while they're already traveling for other services, it's just the reality."** Over time, this pattern weakens the customer base of small Adirondack grocers and reinforces a cycle in which convenience outweighs community support, further exacerbating food access challenges for residents without reliable transportation, including older adults and lower-income households.



Threats and Barriers

This shift also shapes consumer expectations. With access to large chain stores like Hannaford, Market 32, or Walmart, online shopping, and year round availability of many foods not locally grown, customers are less willing to adapt to limited inventories, seasonal offerings, or substitutions. Customers come into smaller stores often expecting the same options and novelty products as larger retailers, which is impossible to meet given the capacity of most rural grocers. This perception can erode community support for local food infrastructure, even when these stores are essential for year-round access. Some grocers see an upside to this dynamic, too: "**We like not having to be responsible for everything,**" one noted, pointing to how nearby dollar stores or larger grocers can take pressure off of a small store to carry it all.

Unless customers make a conscious decision to shop locally, rural grocers can be perceived as insufficient rather than appropriately scaled to their communities. As one grocer put it, convincing people to shop local means asking them to see it **"like a tax you pay on your product to help keep this thing alive."**

But a grocery store close to home is not just a convenience: it's part of what makes a community function. When the store stays open, residents have goods and services within reach when they need them, not just when a trip to Plattsburgh, Glens Falls, or Utica happens to align, or a delivery truck happens to show up. Keeping a local grocery store viable helps make a town whole.

Food Distribution and Sourcing

Food distribution presents a structural barrier for Adirondack grocery stores. Many wholesalers require minimum order sizes that exceed what small, low volume stores can reliably sell, especially during the winter months. As a result, stores may face fewer delivery options or limited access to certain product categories.

Sourcing local or regional food is its own challenge, and doesn't simply come down to the grocer's desire to stock it. **"If there was a way to get local produce easier, I would do it 100%," one grocer explained, "but to go get stuff is a pain. You can't be going all over the place in three different directions to get produce for your store."** Stores located deep within the Park have fewer opportunities to source local food, especially produce with a short shelf life and narrow season. Counties like Hamilton have virtually no local farms, making fresh, local food far less physically accessible.

Even where consumer interest in local products exists, small grocers often lack the infrastructure, storage capacity, or administrative support needed to work with multiple small suppliers. Some Adirondack communities have the privilege of being served by a food hub, which connects farms to retailers and consumers, but

many rural communities don't have access to these deliveries. Absent that, sourcing local falls to the grocer alone: taking the trips, building the relationships, and finding the time that local sourcing demands.

Local food is the top tier of the food security ladder, the one that offers the deepest community and economic benefit, and it's also the tier that's hardest for isolated stores to reach without outside support. Closing that gap through food hub access, aggregation, and distribution partnerships isn't a luxury upgrade; it's what it takes for the tier to be reachable at all.

Seasonality

"Seasonality is huge," one grocer said. "It drives almost every challenge we face." Summer months bring an influx of tourists and seasonal residents, increasing demand for groceries. These customers often have higher disposable incomes and may prioritize convenience and product quality, making them more likely to shop locally rather than travel long distances.

Winter brings the opposite: a dramatic drop in population and spending, while fixed costs like utilities, insurance, and equipment maintenance stay constant. Year-round residents alone can't sustain the sales volume needed to cover those costs, straining financials and staffing even further. This boom-and-bust cycle makes financial planning difficult and raises the risk of closure, particularly for stores carrying debt or investing heavily in inventory ahead of the summer rush.

It's a familiar situation to anyone who works with Adirondack farms. CSA programs exist for the same reason: a farm needs cash up front, before the growing season, not after the harvest. Grocers face the same mismatch between when money is needed and when it arrives, just without a CSA-equivalent tool to bridge the gap.



From a food access perspective, this instability is critical. Grocery stores that close for the season, or permanently, leave residents with fewer options and longer travel distances for basic necessities, deepening food insecurity in already vulnerable areas. Grocers who stay open during the slow months, meanwhile, take on real financial risk to keep their communities served.

The Cost of Staying Open

Staffing costs and shortages are another barrier heard from many grocers. Adirondack grocery stores compete for labor in a region with a limited workforce, high housing costs in some communities, and seasonal employment patterns and rising labor costs. Summer tourism increases competition for workers and the need for additional help, while winter slowness can lead to reduced hours or layoffs, making grocery employment less stable and less attractive.

These staffing challenges limit a store's ability to extend hours, add services, or adapt to changing community needs. Over time, operational strain reduces resilience and increases burnout among owners and managers, many of whom already perform multiple roles to keep stores running.



Delivery adds another layer of pressure. As online grocery ordering and delivery become standard with larger retailers, rural grocers continue to lose out on orders that can be shipped from an online retailer, including those which stock and quickly ship fresh produce, frozen meats and fish, or dry goods. Rural grocers face growing pressure to offer the same convenience, but usually without the staff, volume, or margins to do it profitably. Offering delivery can mean absorbing labor and fuel costs that a small store's margins can't easily support, leaving grocers to choose between an expectation they can't affordably meet and losing customers to retailers who can.

Payment processing adds a less visible but significant cost. Rural grocers absorb credit card fees as a service to customers who increasingly expect the convenience of paying by card. Those fees add up fast, and against thin margins already strained by staffing and delivery pressures, they can be one of a store's largest expenses. "**I pay more in credit card fees a year than what I pay my highest paid employee**," one grocer said.

"I pay more in credit card fees a year than what I pay my highest paid employee"



Taken together, these barriers illustrate the fragile position rural grocery stores occupy within Adirondack communities and the threats they are facing. At the same time, the very conditions that make operating a grocery store in the Adirondacks difficult have also fostered adaptability, creativity, and a sense of community. One grocer states that **"My strong suit is I figure out how to work with what I got."** These businesses are being driven by innovators and entrepreneurs who may enjoy the challenges of the rural economy.

Grocers who remain open through winter months, diversify income streams, or find ways to serve fluctuating populations demonstrate a level of resilience that is characteristic of the region as a whole. Adirondack communities have long relied on resourcefulness to navigate economic and geographic constraints, and grocery stores are no exception.

Understanding these barriers is essential not only to recognizing the risks rural grocers face, but also to identifying where intervention, investment, and collaboration can be most effective. The following section highlights the strengths, assets, and emerging opportunities that Adirondack grocery stores and their communities can build upon to improve food access and support local economies.

What's Working: Strengths and Opportunities

Despite significant barriers, rural grocery stores in the Adirondacks demonstrate strengths in traditional business practices and innovative adaptations to help support their businesses. Understanding what is working well can inform peer learning among grocers and guide strategic support from economic development agencies, policymakers, funders, and community partners.

General Store Model

Many Adirondack grocers have found success by embracing a modern version of the general store model. Historically, general stores served as central hubs in rural communities by providing food, household goods, tools, and a place for residents to connect. While this model has largely disappeared in urban areas, it remains well suited to low-density, rural Adirondack communities where a single location must meet a wide range of needs.

One grocer smilingly described themselves as "an 'overgrown convenience store'; we're trying to meet as many needs as possible in one place." By carrying a diverse mix of products, rural grocers reduce the need for residents to travel long distances for essentials. Other rural grocers may learn from this approach by thinking expansively about what "grocery" means in their community.

"We're an 'overgrown convenience store' trying to meet as many needs as possible in one place."

The Store as Third Space

Many rural grocery stores function as informal community centers in addition to retail spaces. Providing Wi-Fi, seating, or workspace creates opportunities for residents to linger, share a meal, and gather, particularly in towns with few public indoor spaces. This helps the concept of "third spaces" blossom in rural communities. As one rural grocer put it, **"The store is this place that is kind of like an anchor in the community; it's preserving the community, keeping the community alive."**

These stores are often information hubs as much as gathering spaces. Community bulletin boards, flyers, and local publications find a home near the register or by the door, making the grocery store one of the few places residents can reliably learn what's happening around town, from a fundraiser to a lost dog to a change in the fire department's schedule. In towns with limited local media or no central gathering place, this informal information network is its own kind of infrastructure. Some stores extend this role further, hosting community events, workshops, or seasonal celebrations, reinforcing their place as local social anchors. These functions build customer loyalty and strengthen community cohesion, especially during winter months when social isolation can increase.



Knowing the Customer

One of the strongest assets of small, independent grocers is their intimate knowledge of their customers and the ability to stock with them in mind. Store owners and staff often know shoppers personally, as well as their preferences, budgets, and seasonal buying habits. This local knowledge allows grocers to tailor inventory more precisely than larger chains. Many stores already collect sales data to identify patterns in demand, seasonal fluctuations, and product performance, enabling more targeted inventory management, particularly for fresh foods, and reducing waste. Successful grocers aim to stock a mix of local, organic, and conventional products to meet a range of preferences and price points.

Prepared Food and Margins

Prepared foods and deli offerings are consistently identified as a major draw for customers. Ready-to-eat food provides convenience and an in-demand service for both residents and visitors, bringing more traffic into the store. Preparing food in-house gives grocers the opportunity to utilize any aging produce or slow-moving food item in stock, reducing food waste and increasing margins. Some stores also offer catering

or pre-order options for community events, meetings, or seasonal gatherings, further diversifying services and revenue. For grocers, investing in even a small prepared food operation can create financial support and community benefits.

Some grocers noted that they supplement staple groceries with higher-margin items that align with customer needs and preferences. These may include prepared foods, personal care items, specialty or niche products, bottled beverages, bulk goods, art, and Adirondack-themed souvenirs. Bulk items including grains or beans, can offer affordable, healthier whole food options for customers while providing strong margins for stores. Merchandise like souvenirs and artwork can capture sales from tourists and seasonal residents while supporting local artists, maximizing the summer income that sustains businesses through the slow winter.

Outreach and Customer Engagement

Many Adirondack grocers are successfully using outreach and engagement strategies to strengthen customer relationships. Active social media presence, strong branding, and consistent messaging help keep stores visible and relevant. Online ordering systems, even when simple, improve convenience and accessibility for customers with limited time or mobility, helping meet the customer's needs. Some stores also host cooking classes, educational workshops, or tastings that promote healthy eating and highlight available products, helping with overall customer engagement and may bring in new shoppers. Grocers have used social media as a way to stay connected to consumers, highlight products or services, and stay active in customer's minds.

SNAP and Double Up Food Bucks

More than 1 in 7 people participate in SNAP in the Adirondacks, which is over 15% of the population. Rural grocery store participation in SNAP and produce incentive programs like Double Up Food Bucks is an important strength in a region where incomes may be lower, food costs higher, and access options limited. These programs play a dual role: improving food access for residents while strengthening the financial viability of small, independent grocers. When local grocery stores accept and actively promote SNAP, they become essential access points for households that might otherwise need to travel long distances for affordable food, especially for older adults, people with disabilities, and families without reliable transportation.

Even so, SNAP dollars don't automatically flow to the closest or most accessible store. Many SNAP recipients are highly attentive to stretching limited benefits as far as possible, and that often means shopping where prices are lowest rather than at a smaller, more bespoke local grocer, even when a local option is closer to home. A rural grocer's SNAP traffic tends to be strongest among residents for whom traveling to a lower-priced store isn't a realistic option in the first place. This is a real limitation on how much SNAP participation alone can support a store's bottom line, not a reason to deprioritize it.



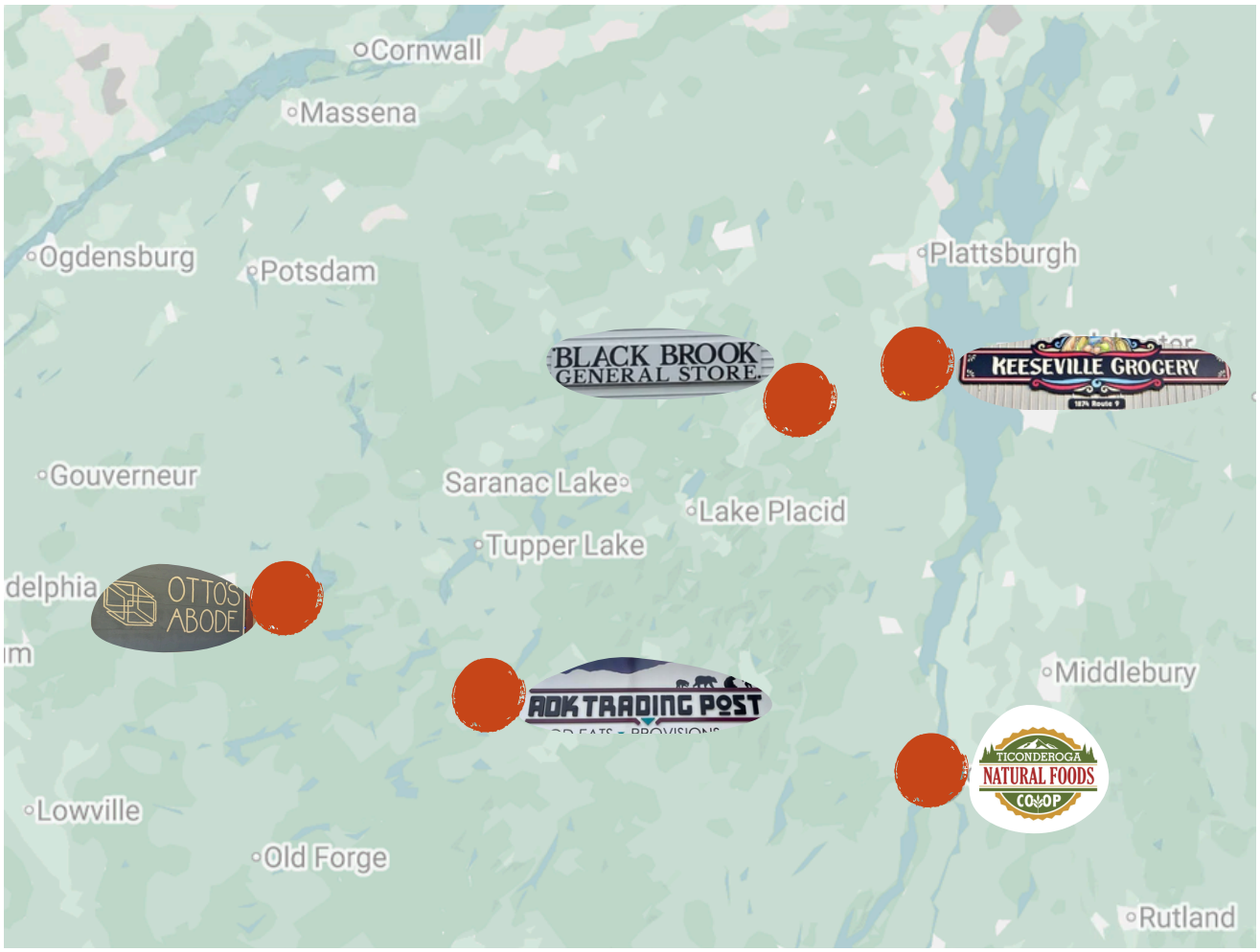
Despite their importance, rural grocers may face barriers to participating in these programs, including administrative burden, technology costs, and limited awareness among customers. **Targeted support from economic development agencies and community partners, such as technical assistance, equipment grants, and outreach funding, can help reduce these barriers and ensure incentive programs are accessible and effective in rural settings.** Ultimately, SNAP and Double Up Food Bucks are not only nutrition assistance tools but also economic development strategies, directing food dollars into local grocery stores and helping ensure Adirondack communities maintain reliable, year-round access to food.

The strengths of Adirondack grocery stores demonstrate that rural food retail is not merely a private business concern but a cornerstone of community resilience. Strategic investments that build on existing assets, rather than imposing a one size fits all solution, can strengthen food access, local economies, and social infrastructure. By recognizing grocery stores as essential community hubs, partners across sectors can help ensure that these businesses not only survive but continue to adapt and thrive in the Adirondack region.

Small Investment, Real Impact

Micro Grants for Grocers

The barriers described in the previous section are real, but they are not unsolvable. Many of the challenges rural grocers face come down to gaps that a modest, targeted investment can close: an aging piece of equipment, a labor-intensive workaround, a missing tool that would let a store do more with the staff and space it already has. **In 2024, AdkAction received funding from the Adirondack Community Foundation through a Generous Acts grant to test this idea, offering small infrastructure grants to grocers** in four counties, Clinton, Essex, Hamilton, and St. Lawrence. Rather than prescribing solutions, we asked grocers what they needed most. Some requests were expected, like refrigeration. Others were not: display shelving, a cardboard compactor, a label printer. In every case, the grocer knew their own barrier better than we did, and the results show what happens when support meets a business on its own terms.





BARRIER ADDRESSED: PRODUCE CAPACITY AND SPOILAGE MANAGEMENT

Ticonderoga Natural Foods Co-Op

The Ticonderoga Food Co-Op is a not-for-profit, member-owned grocery store overseen by a board of directors, with a mission centered on serving the community and sourcing locally. In 2024, they sourced roughly 57% of their products from local and regional producers, including Juniper Hill, Lillie Valley Farm, North Country Creamery, and Crown Point Bread Company. Like many of the grocers described in the prepared foods and margins strategies earlier in this report, the co-op has grown a prepared foods program, soups, salads, and catering, built around a dedicated in-house chef, turning a strength identified across the region into an established part of their business.

Through the micro grant project, the co-op purchased wooden sales floor displays for unrefrigerated produce, increasing capacity while reducing spoilage, since certain produce can accelerate spoilage in other produce stored nearby. The displays also improved the visual appeal of the store. Since installing them, the co-op has added a wider variety of sweet potatoes and onions that didn't fit previously, and they expect to need even more produce space heading into summer.

Micro Grants for Grocers



BARRIER ADDRESSED: SHOPPING CAPACITY & PREPARED FOODS CAPACITY/ SAFETY

Otto's Abode

At the center of Wanakena, a small, out-of-the-way community deep in the northwestern Adirondacks, sits Otto's Abode, open seven days a week, year-round. Co-owner Nolan calls it "an inconvenience store," a family-run reinvention of the former Wanakena General Store that blends the practical role of a rural general store with the spirit of a community hub: local goods, local knowledge, art, events, and a dependable gathering place in a region where both food and community space can be hard to come by.

That same generalist instinct shows up in how Otto's Abode approached the micro grant, choosing upgrades that address two distinct barriers at once. To keep up with growing produce purchases, they bought three small-footprint shopping carts, making it easier for customers to shop for larger grocery trips in a small store. To expand their prepared foods capacity, they added a heated countertop display case and countertop refrigerator, allowing for safe, efficient self-service options for ready-to-eat meals, along with a professional label printer to improve consistency and food safety for perishable and prepared items. Much like the store itself, the investment cast a wide net, meeting several small needs at once rather than solving one problem at scale.

Together, these upgrades make Otto's Abode more efficient and increase access to fresh, perishable food for residents and visitors alike. In a rural region with limited food infrastructure, even modest operational upgrades can have an outsized impact. This equipment helps the store continue growing as one of the area's dependable year-round food sources, while strengthening its ability to support local farmers, producers, and makers. More than a convenience store, Otto's Abode is proof that a small-town grocer can still serve as an oasis of food, culture, and connection in the North Country.



BARRIER ADDRESSED: EQUIPMENT FAILURE AND FOOD SAFETY COMPLIANCE

ADK Trading Post

Located in Long Lake in Hamilton County, ADK Trading Post provides groceries, prepared foods, and gifts for locals and visitors seven days a week, making efficient use of a small space to meet everyday needs without a trip to a larger neighboring town. In a town of just over 700 year-round residents, the nearest year-round grocery store is 22 miles away in Tupper Lake, with larger options nearly 75 miles south in Glens Falls, making regular grocery trips difficult, especially for older adults, single-person households, families, and residents with limited transportation.

ADK Trading Post used their micro grant to purchase a commercial refrigerator, replacing one in the kitchen space that was failing to hold temperature and had a malfunctioning door. The new fridge is more energy efficient, lowering operating costs while ensuring safe storage for the fresh ingredients and perishable foods used in daily soups, paninis, and grocery offerings. The upgrade also brings the store into better alignment with inspection standards, an important piece of food safety compliance.



BARRIER ADDRESSED: WASTE MANAGEMENT COSTS & SPOILAGE/ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Keeseville Grocery

In 2024, Keeseville Grocery opened in a storefront previously occupied by a dollar store, offering a full range of products found at a commercial store, including a deli counter. The hamlet's other food access options are limited: a second dollar store, a self-serve farm store a couple of miles outside the hamlet's center, and comparable grocery stores a 15-minute drive away in Peru or 25 minutes in Plattsburgh. For nearby residents without reliable transportation, Keeseville Grocery fills a real gap.

The micro grant process surfaced a barrier not previously highlighted elsewhere in this report: waste management. Grocery stores generate large amounts of cardboard and shipping material, and breaking it down and disposing of it falls to store employees. At Keeseville Grocery, that amounted to 6-8 hours of staff time each week, plus $400 a month in removal costs, expenses that a cardboard compactor could eliminate entirely, since the grocery supplier would pick up compacted cardboard for free and recycle it. With their grant, Keeseville Grocery purchased a compactor to address exactly that.

They also purchased cooler curtains for their produce and meat cases, improving energy efficiency when the store is closed while also protecting products from light and warmer air, reducing spoilage. Neither upgrade is visible to a customer walking through the store, but together they save staff time, cut monthly costs, and reduce waste, the kind of behind-the-scenes efficiency that keeps a small grocery store financially sustainable.



BARRIER ADDRESSED: ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND COLD STORAGE

Black Brook General Store

Housed inside a restored white church, complete with the original stained glass, is Black Brook General Store. Owners Bobbie and Michelle Timmons closed on the building the first week of March 2020, and with the help of their two daughters, spent the first six months of the covid-19 pandemic remodeling the space, updating the plumbing and electrical, and exchanging the pews for grocery shelves. After opening in 2021, Black Brook General Store has been serving the surrounding community, both locals and seasonal visitors with a full service deli, including breakfast and lunch sandwiches, beverages, groceries, a small hardware selection, and a spot for local artisans to sell their products.

Serving fresh food has always posed a challenge for Black Brook General as the produce doesn't always sell immediately and they needed space to store it for longer. Through the microgrant project, Black Brook General Store purchased a Mini Split Air Conditioner Heat Pump which they use to refrigerate their walk-in-cooler–a small but effective infrastructure improvement that has not only reduced their energy costs, but has also opened up new possibilities for expanding their fresh food selection in the future.

Five grocers, five different solutions: what these stories share is not a single fix, but a model. Small, targeted investment, shaped by the grocer's own read of their biggest barrier, produced real operational change: less spoilage, more prepared food capacity, safer storage, hours of staff time returned each week. None of these upgrades were expensive by the standard of major infrastructure investment, and none required a grocer to change how they already do business. They simply removed a barrier that was already there. Scaled further, this same model offers a low-cost, high-leverage way to strengthen grocery stores in similar rural communities.

Consumer Input

Grocery stores aren't alone in adapting creatively to rural food access. Consumer experience shows the same compounding challenges from the other side of the counter. Stories from consumers reveal the planning that goes into a task that is, in most places, mundane. Many Adirondack households rely on 4 to 6 different stores, farms, and markets to meet basic food needs, with some residents traveling up to 70 miles round trip for desired or affordable groceries. These longer trips may occur every 2-3 weeks, requiring consumers to stock up and plan ahead. Local, smaller grocery stores are more often used for "gap" shopping, a missing ingredient, or a special item rather than a full trip.

We heard a range of reasons as to why consumers shop where they shop. Some value knowing where their food comes from and how far it traveled; others prefer the ease of a one-stop shop and a familiar layout. Across both groups, price remained a primary driver for store choice, and many who wanted to support local grocers, found that cost got in the way. Consumers sought out farm stores specifically for eggs, meat, milk, and bread, shopping there for those items alone.

Seasonal solutions such as CSAs and farmers markets significantly improve access, especially of produce, during the growing season but do not replace the need for viable, year-round rural grocery options. Consumers can plan around a farm stand's season. They cannot plan around a grocery store that closes for good.

Adirondack households rely on

4-6 stores, farms, and markets

to meet basic food needs

with some traveling up to

70 miles round trip



Call to Action

No matter how far people are willing to drive, or how much can be delivered to their door, communities will always need a store close to home to buy essential goods, and a place to run into each other while they do it. That is what a rural grocery store provides, and it is why keeping one open is not a convenience, but core infrastructure for a community's ability to function and stay connected.

The grocers in this report are working to meet their community's needs with available resources, and finding creative solutions to problems, but a sector built on thin margins, seasonal swings, and constant improvisation cannot sustain itself on resourcefulness alone. **It needs partners: economic development agencies that recognize grocery stores as economic anchors, not just retail tenants; government programs that extend the same infrastructure support given to other small businesses; and nonprofit and philanthropic partners willing to invest directly in the businesses already doing this work, and see it as a core component of the food system.**

Our own micro grant project was a small test of that idea: modest, targeted investment, shaped by what each grocer identified as their own biggest barrier. Five grocers, four counties, and a handful of practical upgrades later, the results speak for themselves. If a small amount of well-placed support can produce results like these, a larger, sustained investment in rural grocery infrastructure is a sound opportunity. We ask you to take it.



Acknowledgements

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Highly important was the direct participation of grocery store partners, including ADK Trading Post, Ticonderoga Food Co-Op, Otto's Abode, Valley Grocery, Keeseville Grocery, Black Brook General Store, and Charlie John's. These grocers shared first hand perspectives on operating rural stores within the Adirondack Park, including challenges related to seasonality, workforce shortages, and community needs. Their input ensured that the project reflected the current conditions and elevated the voices of rural grocers themselves.

Together, these partners strengthened the project by aligning funding, systems level understanding, and lived experience to create a collaborative foundation for meaningful support of rural grocery stores in the Adirondacks.



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